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Plot on Pope: Bulgaria Tie?

On Basis of Evidence, Answer Is Not Known

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ROME, Dec. 29 — Did the Turkish gunman who shot Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, act on the orders of the Bulgarian secret police? If he did, was it at the behest of the

K.G.B., headed at the time by Yuri V. Andropov, now the Soviet party leader?

Neither question, in the forefront of governmental, journalistic and public discussion in Italy and elsewhere, can be answered on the basis of the evidence now available.

But if it turns out that the Bulgarian secret police guided the actions of Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman serving a life sentence after one of the most rapid trials in Italian judicial history since World War II, then, it is generally believed, the ultimate responsibility rests with Moscow.

Nothing in the history of postwar Bulgaria points to an appreciable measure of independence from the Soviet Union, particularly not in foreign affairs. Political, diplomatic and intelligence experts in non-Communist countries hold it to be inconceivable that Bulgarian secret agents would have undertaken so portentous an assignment as the assassination of the Pope except on express orders of the Soviet Union.

It is also a matter of common belief among Western secret services that Bulgaria has rendered aid to the Soviet K.G.B. in general espionage and "dirty-trick" activities in Western and pro-Western countries and has not hesitated to order its agents to kill "enemies" on foreign soil.

In addition, European intelligence and police officials are certain that considerable amounts of heroin from Western Asia reach Western Europe via Bulgaria and assume that a country that so fully controls all phases of life within its borders cannot be unaware of this transit traffic, much of it in Turkish trucks. They assume, therefore, that minimally this trade has Bulgarian tolerance, if not approval.

Bulgaria is also reputed to be a major market for illegal arms dealing. Israeli intelligence sources reported that the Bulgarian port of Varna handled 80 percent of a large flow of Communist arms to Palestine Liberation Organization camps in Lebanon. Many arms seized from terrorist groups throughout Europe, including Turkey, are reported to have originated in Soviet-bloc countries and to have reached the terrorists via their Palestinian friends.

There are many questions that would have to be answered before the establishment of any direct link between the Soviet Union and the attempt to assassinate the Pope. One is what the Soviet motivation for such an attempt would be. Unanimity among those who believe that if Bulgaria engineered the plot then the Soviet Union is ultimately responsible declines drastically on the question of motivation.

It is generally agreed that the Pope exercised extraordinary influence in rousing the majority of Poles to confront their regime openly and provoke the most serious threat to the Soviet hold over its Eastern European satellites since the Czechoslovak "spring" of 1968.

But many professional political and intelligence analysts question whether the murder of the Pope would have significantly weakened the movement led by the Solidarity trade union, which was at its peak in May 1981. They doubt even more that the Soviet Union, which they consider cautious in international affairs, would have taken so great a risk as plotting a political assassination of Shakespearean magnitude, entrusting its execution to a 23-year-old Turkish terrorist of doubtful emotional stability and doing so when the chances of his falling into the hands of the Italian police, on crowded St. Peter's Square, were far better than even.

A Matter of Allegation

It is also noted that subsequent events proved that the Soviet Union had entirely Polish means at its disposal to solve the Polish issue without attempting to do so by so spectacular and risky means as the murder of the Pope.

So far, even the official Bulgarian involvement is only a matter of allegation. The only legal action taken against a Bulgarian citizen was the arrest Nov. 25 of the station chief of Balkan Airlines, Serge Ivanov Antonov, at his office here. His detention was ordered by Judge Ilario Martella, the magistrate investigating the question of whether Mr. Agca had acted alone, as he had contended, or had the support of accomplices. Mr. Antonov was detained on suspicion of "active complicity." Under Italian law, criminal cases are prepared by an investigative magistrate who then rules on whether or not the evidence is strong enough to warrant a trial.

Mr. Martella has maintained silence on the nature of Mr. Antonov's "complicity" as well as on all other aspects of the inquiry. But members of the Government of Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani, yielding to mounting pressure from the public and the press, appeared before the Chamber of Deputies on Dec. 20 to state the official view for the first time.

2 Others Under Investigation

What emerged from the daylong debate, in which four ministers reported to the Chamber and replied to questions, was a clear Government belief that Judge Martella's actions were based on substantive information, although no sources were disclosed. The ministers also said that not only Mr. Antonov but two members of the Bulgarian Embassy staff would have been detained by Judge Martella if they had not been covered by diplomatic immunity.

Justice Minister Clelio Darida said that the two continued to be under investigation, although they have returned to Bulgaria. He named them as Zhelyo Kolev Vasilev and Todor Stoyanov Aivazov. Bulgaria identified Mr. Vassilev as an army major who served as secretary to the military attaché here and Mr. Aivazov as head of the embassy's financial section.

As Judge Martella had done earlier in his only statement since Mr. Antonov's arrest — which loosed a wave of circumstantial reports in the Italian press and broadcasting without attribution to sources — Mr. Darida, Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo and Interior Minister Virginio Rognoni limited their assertions of a Bulgarian link to the attempt on the Pope's life to Bulgarian individuals. An aide of the Justice Minister repeated in response to a question on Tuesday that the Government was not accusing the Bulgarian Government.

'An Act of War'

Defense Minister Lello Lagorio accused the Soviet Union, without naming it, of committing "an act of war" by choosing to assassinate the Pope rather than invading Poland. Mr. Lagorio did not elaborate on the sources that provided him with the information on such a Soviet dilemma.

The minister also reported that coded radio traffic between Bulgaria and Italy rose sharply at the time of the attempt on the Pope's life, as well as during last year's kidnapping by the Red Brigades of Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier of the United States Army, and said that this suggested the activation of "sleepers" agents. In line with assertions depicting Bulgaria as a center of espionage and arms and narcotics smuggling, Mr. Colombo hinted at visa restrictions on Bulgarians and expulsions of Bulgarian Embassy staff members.

But the parliamentary debate did not produce any additional specifics on a Bulgarian-run plot on the Pope's life. The only known facts are these:

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Mr. Agca has been convicted of firing the shots. In his initial interrogations after his arrest, Italian police sources said he included Bulgaria among the countries that he had visited between his escape from a Turkish prison and the assassination attempt. Mr. Antonov has been arrested on suspicion of "active complicity" and is under investigation prior to possible filing of specific charges and subsequent trial.

Omer Bagci, also a Turk, is in prison here after extradition from Switzerland on suspicion of having supplied the gunman with the Browning pistol used in the attempt. The West German authorities are detaining in Frankfurt Musar Cedar Celebi, leader of a rightist-extremist Turkish group, and are considering an Italian request for his extradition. According to the German authorities, Mr. Celebi is wanted for having supplied Mr. Agca with money.

Bechir Celink, a Turk, is wanted by the Italian police in connection with the attack on the Pope and is in custody in Bulgaria pending a ruling by the Bulgarian prosecutor general on extradition.

A fifth Turk, Oral Celik, whose whereabouts is unknown, is also wanted for reasons that have not been disclosed.

At the request of Italy, West Germany arrested last February Omer Ay, a Turk, on suspicion of having supplied Mr. Agca with a false passport. To the Germans' surprise, Italy dropped the case after interrogation that suggested to German officials that the charge had substance.

Reports and Speculation

The specific suspicions that cause Judge Martella's interest in Mr. Aivazov and Mr. Vasilev have not been disclosed.

On this sparse network of fact or allegation to which persons in authority have been willing to attach their names as sources of information has been grafted a welter of unsourced Italian newspaper reporting and speculation. The source of all this information is said to be Mr. Agca, who is reported to have changed his earlier defense that he acted alone and to have been disclosing details of his supposed associations with other Turks and Bulgarians.

How what have been termed Mr. Agca's disclosures have reached the Italian press is a secret to which experienced students of Italian journalistic tradition find the key in close associations between press "tipsters" and officials nurtured mutually over many years.

Summarized, this account emerges from the newspaper articles based on undisclosed sources:

Mr. Agca, wanted by the Turkish police after a breakout from a prison where he was held on charges of mur-

dering a newspaper editor in 1979, was spirited to Bulgaria by Mr. Celik and introduced in Sofia to Mr. Celenk. Mr. Celenk introduced him to three members of the Bulgarian secret service, Messrs. Antonov, Aivazov and Vasilev. They offered him 3 million West German marks — about \$1.25 million — to murder the Pope, an act for which he had been commissioned by Mr. Celenk while still in prison. In Bulgaria earlier this month, Mr. Celenk denied ever having met Mr. Agca and Bulgarian officials said they did not even know if Mr. Agca had ever been in Bulgaria, since tourists can pass through the country without visas.

According to the Italian press accounts, Mr. Agca was instructed to spend several months traveling alone to many countries in order to blur the track. About two weeks before the assassination attempt, he was ordered to Rome, where he contacted Mr. Antonov and through him the two other Bulgarians. Mr. Antonov and Mr. Aivazov accompanied him to St. Peter's Square on the two days preceding the attempt for rehearsals and drove him to the scene of the attack on May 13.

A Bundle of Photographs

No evidence for any part of this account has been published. As corroboration for the allegation that Mr. Agca had contacts with the Bulgarian officials, it has been reported that he identified their photographs out of a bundle of 56 pictures presented to him. Moreover, he has been reported, again without source, to have furnished telephone numbers for Mr. Aivazov, as well as descriptions of the interiors of his apartment and his automobile.

Mr. Antonov denies all the charges, and the two other Bulgarians have not been questioned by Judge Martella or any other Italian. The Bulgarian Government denies all complicity. A Bulgarian diplomat here asked how Mr. Agca could have supplied Mr. Aivazov's home telephone number in view of the fact that during his entire stay in Rome Mr. Aivazov had no home telephone and was reachable only through the embassy switchboard, whose number is in the telephone book.

Moreover, the Bulgarian diplomat said, no representative of the Italian authorities has asked to inspect Mr. Aivazov's apartment, which is in a house belonging to the embassy and covered by extraterritoriality, to verify Mr. Agca's alleged description.

The diplomat also noted that last

April or May, the police entered the Balkan Air office to seize a number of documents, apparently relating to the case of a union official arrested in February, who is said to have disclosed espionage links to Bulgaria. Mr. Antonov himself, the official said, went to the police to reclaim the documents.

Establishment of an Alibi

The diplomat said that even if Mr. Antonov had remained in Rome for nearly a year after the attempt against the Pope, he would have been a singularly naïve conspirator to have stayed after that incident.

For the time being, the only judicial action scheduled in the near future is an appearance before Judge Martella of the witnesses cited by Mr. Antonov to establish an alibi for the days on which Mr. Agca is reported to have told investigators that the Bulgarian was on St. Peter's Square with him. At a later date, Judge Martella will face a decision on whether his investigation has provided enough of a case to charge and try Mr. Antonov.

Other governments and their intelligence agencies appear to be waiting to see more evidence of the Italian case before reaching conclusions. General suspicion of the Soviet Union and its known links with the secret services of Bulgaria and all Soviet allies keep open in their minds the possibility that Moscow, through Bulgarian agents, may have staged the attempted assassination of the Pope.

But in the absence of any known evidence other than circumstantial, all questions on whether Mr. Agca had accomplices and whether he and they acted on behalf of the Bulgarian secret service remain unanswered. The only evidence on the record convicted Mr. Agca of the deed. Therefore, the prevalent mood in other capitals ranges from a readiness to be convinced to skepticism.